FOLKLORE, HISTORY, AND THE IROQUOIS CONDOLENCE CANE

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This article focuses on the folklore of the Iroquois Condolence Cane and on the involutionary development of this folklore. By involutionary development I am implying that the folklore which has developed concerning the history and use of the Iroquois Condolence Cane is an example of the process described by Geertz as

> . . . those culture patterns which, after having reached what would seem to be a definitive form, nonetheless fail either to stabilize or transform themselves into a new pattern but rather continue to develop by becoming internally more complicated.[1]

Geertz borrowed this concept from Goldenweiser who saw the primary effect of patterns as limiting development. Goldenweiser pointed out that involution

> . . . is a pattern plus continued development. The pattern precludes the use of another unit or of other units. . . . The inevitable result is progressive complication, variety within uniformity, virtuosity with monotony.[2]

Such is the history of the Iroquois Condolence Cane and its folklore.

The Iroquois Condolence Cane had its origin as an idiosyncratic mnemonic device used to remind the singer of the Eulogy of the fifty sachems of the Iroquois Confederacy and to aid in the recall of the Condolence Council. Today, one can see many such canes in use in several of the Iroquois Longhouse communities.[3] The proliferation of Condolence Canes can be attributed to the publication and subsequent availability of the specific pictographs for both the Roll Call and the Introduction to the Eulogy. While the original Cane is probably not more than 115 years old, and its widespread duplication is less than 25 years old, many ideas concerning the antiquity and use of the Cane have become part of the Iroquois oral tradition. Fenton, in his comprehensive monograph about the Condolence Cane has outlined the history of mnemonic devices among the Iroquois. Although the Iroquois employed mnemonics in many segments of their culture, it appears as though these mnemonic devices were not utilized for the Condolence Council. Fenton writes that:

> Other than the frequent mention of sticks, belts, and strings of wampum, none of the early writers on the Iroquois reports mnemonic pictographs for the Condolence Council.[4]

The Condolence Council, including the Eulogy, is one of the more significant ceremonies of the Iroquois Confederacy. It is performed whenever one of the fifty sachemships of the League is to be filled. As Hewitt and Fenton note, "when the League was founded the law-giver decreed that no seat around the

great council fire should remain vacant."[5] Articles 29 through 34 of "The Constitution of the Five Nations" or "The Great Binding Law" spell out the procedure for filling vacant seats in the Grand Council of the Five Iroquois Nations.[6] The condolence ceremony itself is of considerable antiquity; Foley states that "the ceremony does not change through time." He points out that Fenton's 1946 description of the condolence ceremony is similar to the nineteenth century descriptions of both Morgan and Hale, while Guy Johnson recorded an account of a condolence ceremony in 1774.[7] The Condolence Council consists of five rituals:

1) Journeying on the trail, including the Eulogy and Roll Call of the Founders of the League.
2) Welcome at the Wood's Edge.
3) The Requickening Address.
4) Six Songs of Farewell.
5) Over the Great Forest.[8]

Both Fenton and Hewitt have described the entire Condolence Council in detail.[9]

In order to help remember the lengthy ceremony which lasts all day, individual Iroquois leaders developed a number of idiosyncratic mnemonic devices to aid in the recall of the Condolence Council. Parker in 1916 described a "record staff containing the history of a condolence and raising ceremony of a royaneh or councellor."[10] This particular cane, round with one flattened surface containing eighteen pictographs on it, refers to the Requickening Address but not to the Roll Call of the fifty sachems. According to Fenton "the carved cane is a new idea which came in with the jack knife"; at least this is what F.W. Waugh was told by an Onondaga informant in 1912.[11] Waugh collected several canes at the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario in 1915; among these canes was one specimen which was used at a Condolence Council. The distinguishing feature of this cane is the attachment of a single string of wampum which, according to the collector's notes, ". . . is said to have signified the number of chiefs . . . ."[12]

But canes were not the only mnemonic devices employed by the Iroquois sachems for remembering the Condolence Council. Hewitt and Fenton describe a set of pictographs found in the well-worn notebook of Chief Abram Charles of the Cayugas. Hewitt collected this notebook in 1920 at the Six Nations Reserve. In Fenton's words:

> Well aware that Abram Charles had great difficulty to read or write the simplest matter in English, Mr. Hewitt naturally was curious to know the contents of this small notebook to which Chief Charles constantly referred. So when a favoring opportunity presented itself Chief Charles was consulted about the matter. Hewitt was no little amazed to learn that this unpretentious notebook contained sets of mnemonic symbols or characters which had been devised ingeniously to indicate the number, the correct sequence of topics, and the roll call of federal titles comprising these two important chants.[13]

There were eight pages of drawings referring to the Roll Call and Requickening Address.

Perhaps the most interesting of the mnemonic devices used in the Condolence Council is the famed Condolence Cane of Andrew Spragg. This particular cane was collected by Milford Chandler around 1920 on the Six Nations Reserve. It surfaced in 1943 when the director of the Cranbrook Institute of Science asked Fenton to identify and describe the cane. The cane itself is made of Sugar Maple and is 890 mm long; its greatest breadth is 37 mm and its greatest thickness is 15 mm. On one side of the cane are fifty pictographs, each representing one of the sachems of the Iroquois Confederacy; next to each pictograph and sectioned off into five alternate panels--three on the right and two on the left--are fifty pegs, each corresponding to one of the pictographs. The pegs are grouped within each panel in the following arrangement:

3-3-3 representing the nine Mohawk titles;
3-3-3 representing the nine Oneida titles;
6-1-2-3-2 representing the fourteen Onondaga titles;
2-3-3-2 representing the ten Cayuga titles;
2-2-2-2 representing the eight Seneca titles.

The reverse side of the cane contains the name A. Sprag and is followed by a set of pictographs representing the Introduction to the Eulogy to the Founders of the League.

The history of this particular cane has been established by Fenton. He feels that "ethnological investigation has developed that the age of the specimen does not carry it back to pre-Columbian times."[14] However, Fenton notes that the ideas which the cane memorializes probably has "ancient cultural roots"; he points out that "the mnemonic which the cane carries is probably older than the pictographs."[15] Earlier canes had pegs only, while the mnemonic is also laid out in kernels of corn. Some of the pictographs on the cane represent items of recent historical introduction such as log houses of the type formerly found at Six Nations, and a nineteenth century claw hammer. Fenton places the date of the manufacture of this particular cane as 1860 and Ganawado as its originator; from Canawado it passed to Sheriff Billy Wage, and from Wage to Andrew Spragg. In summary Fenton writes that:

> Unquestionably it was devised on an ancient mnemonic design in order to preserve the memory of the Eulogy chant and roll call and to support the performance of the Condolence Council for installing new chiefs after settlement on the Grand River. Although it is now a sacred relic, and it has been reproduced once more by the Cayugas, . . ./it/ . . . does not antedate the American Revolution and the dissolution of the League in New York. It cannot be referred, therefore, to the period of the founding of the League.[16]

Since the publication of Fenton's monograph in 1950, a number of interesting processes, which may be called involutionary, have taken place. Fenton distributed blueprints of the pictographs around the Six Nations Reserve to aid in the identification of the cane. This, along with the viewing of the cane itself, led to the reproduction of the cane referred to by Fenton in his 1950 monograph. More significant was the publication of the pictographs themselves.

maintains their ethnicity by reinforcing the unique political organization of the League of the Iroquois. What began as an idiosyncratic mnemonic device has become incorporated into the Pan-Iroquois culture of the modern Longhouse. Various notions on the antiquity of the cane and its importance in the ritual support its folkloristic role. As Ben-Amos points out, "folklore communication takes place in a situation in which people confront each other face to face and relate to each other directly."[19]

The processual nature of folklore as exemplified by the role of the Condolence Cane in contemporary Iroquois Indian culture illustrates the efficacy of Ben-Amos' definition of folklore as a process, "a communicative process, to be exact."[20] Ben-Amos writes that:

> Although folklore is a distinct category in terms of interaction patterns and communication media, it is not necessarily recognized by the culture as a separate concept. In fact, within the cognitive system its forms may be classified into such apparently unrelated categories as history, tradition, dance, music, games, and tales. The reason for this categorization is inherent in the nature of the folkloristic communication itself. Folklore, like any other art, is a symbolic kind of action.[21]

The folklore of the Iroquois Condolence Cane is a communicative process, it is ". . . all conventional expressive devices available for performance and the achievement of performer status within a socially bounded group."[22] The folklore of the Condolence Cane is action that is performed and, as such, is not exclusively a product of tradition nor one of oral transmission; it is performance within a culturally defined pattern. The tradition of the Condolence Cane as a widespread cultural phenomenon is not more than twenty-five years old while its transmission has been based upon the printed word. However, the traditions that have developed about the cane are part of the process of involution, that is, the progressive complication of a simple pattern by elaboration and repetition of component units. This involutionary process is manifest in the folklore of the Iroquois Condolence Cane.[23]

NOTES

1. Clifford Geertz, Agricultural Involution (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 80-81.

2. Alexander A. Goldenweiser, "Loose Ends of Theory on the Individual, Pattern, and Involution in Primitive Society," Essays in Anthropology Presented to A.L. Kroeber, ed. R. Lowie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1936), pp. 102-03.

3. There are eleven Iroquois Longhouse communities throughout New York, Ontario, and Quebec. The Iroquois Confederacy or League of the Iroquois, also called the Five (Six) Nations, consists of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas; the Tuscaroras joined the League after 1713.

4. William N. Fenton, The Roll Call of the Iroquois Chiefs: A Study of a Mnemonic Cane from the Six Nations Reserve (Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, vol. 111, no. 15; Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1950), p. 7.

5. J.N.B. Hewitt and William N. Fenton, "Some Mnemonic Pictographs Relating to the Iroquois Condolence Council," Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences 35 (1945): 301.

6. Arthur C. Parker, The Constitution of the Five Nations (New York State Museum Bulletin, no. 184; Albany, 1916), pp. 39-40.

7. William N. Fenton, "An Iroquois Condolence Council for installing Cayuga chiefs in 1945," Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences 36 (1946): 110-27; Lewis H. Morgan, League of the Ho-De-No-Sau-Nee or Iroquois, ed. H.M. Lloyd (New York: Dodd, Mead Co., 1901); Horatio Hale, The Iroquois Book of Rites (Brinton's Library of Aboriginal American Literature, no. 2; Philadelphia, 1883); Hale, "An Iroquois Condoling Council," Royal Society of Canada, Proceedings and Transactions, 2nd ser, no. 11 (1895), pp. 45-65; Denis Foley, "The Iroquois Condolence Business," Man in the Northeast 5 (1973): 47-53.

8. J.N.B. Hewitt, "The Requickening Address of the Iroquois Condolence Council," Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences (ed. W.N. Fenton) 34 (1944); 65.

9. Fenton, "An Iroquois Condolence Council"; Hewitt, "The Requickening Address"; Hewitt and Fenton, "Some Mnemonic Pictographs."

10. Parker, pp. 111-12.

11. Fenton, The Roll Call, pp. 30-31.

12. Ibid., p. 32.

13. Hewitt and Fenton, p. 302.

14. Fenton, The Roll Call, p. 68.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p. 70.

17. The St. Regis Reserve is located along the 45th parallel in New York, Ontario, and Quebec.

18. Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," Journal of American Folklore 84 (1971): 13.

19. Ibid., pp. 12-13.

20. Ibid., p. 9.

21. Ibid., p. 11.

22. Roger Abrahams, "Personal Power and Social Restraint in the Definition of Folklore," Journal of American Folklore 84 (1971): 28.

23. An earlier draft of this paper was read at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society in Portland, Oregon, November 1974.